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Construction is to begin next week on a Great Lakes Naval Station road project expected to help trigger a renaissance for neighboring North Chicago's business district.

Federal and state officials gathered Monday to celebrate building the railroad crossing needed to reopen Great Lakes' north gate, which will lead directly to Martin Luther King Drive and Sheridan Road in North Chicago. The gate has been shut to Navy and civilian commuters since 1991.

Plans call for a development with stores, restaurants and a hotel near the Navy's north gate. North Chicago's government and private developers are marketing a 32-acre site pegged for the project.

Democratic state Sen. Terry Link of Waukegan said North Chicago's Sheridan Road commercial corridor along the base has potential to be converted into a regional draw. At one time, it was common for visitors and naval personnel to come and go from the base's north gate, he said.

"This was a vibrant, exciting area here," Link said, "and there is no reason it can't be again in the near future."

Without direct access from the Navy base to Martin Luther King Drive and Sheridan Road, sailors on the sprawling property exit from the south. They typically travel about 10 miles to spend their money at Gurnee retailers and eateries, according to a survey.

Officials at Monday's event said all of the activity will bring construction jobs and lead to more revenue for North Chicago's schools. The Navy's work at the north gate — also known as Gate 4 — is to start next week, with completion projected for December.

Republican U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk secured more than \$1 million from the federal Economic Development Administration to aid the planned development at Sheridan Road and Martin Luther King Drive outside Great Lakes.

Kirk said Monday that North Chicago deserves to benefit economically from the Navy's presence on its border.

"When this (north) gate closed, it weakened the business district of North Chicago and it weakened the tax base here," Kirk said during the ceremony in the shadows of closed businesses and vacant lots on Sheridan Road.

If built, the development near the Navy's north gate would be called Sheridan Crossing. North Chicago and the developers marketing the project site, including McShane Corp., are touting how the Navy attracts about 200,000 visitors annually for graduations at Great Lakes.

Kirk noted how no viable eateries exist on Sheridan Road near Great Lakes' north gate, meaning dining options on the base in that area are limited to places such as Taco Bell and Subway Sandwiches and Salads.

Great Lakes' north gate was closed after a Sheridan Road was partially converted into an expressway in 1991. Officials said the failed expressway led to the Gate 4 closure and subsequently killed the once-thriving Sheridan Road businesses.